

William Garvey
Editor, Steel Labor
Chicago, Illinois

THE STEELWORKERS' SOUTH CHICAGO COMMUNITY SERVICES PROGRAM

The United Steelworkers of America is a voluntary organization that has deep ties in the communities in which its members either work or live, or both. It is vital that such an organization maintains lines of communication, both to members within those communities and to the general public as well. That is one of the reasons for the United Steelworkers' Community Services Program; another is the belief that what is good for the general public and community is good for members and the places they live. Some background history of the United Steelworkers of America—how it started and why it does some of the things that will be discussed—might be helpful.

Anyone who has ever lived in a steelmaking community where the dominant industry is the conversion of coal, limestone, and iron ore into raw steel, knows the process is dirty, grimy, requires a lot of hard manual labor and is a round-the-clock operation. Even in today's modern industrial complex, the working conditions, in many instances, are little better than they were when the first iron was melted and the first steel ingot poured. It is still a hot, grimy back-breaking job.

Most of the steelmaking facilities in the United States were originally located in cities and towns where the economic social and political life of the community was dominated by the owners or managers of the vast steelmaking facilities. The owners of the industry frowned, or worse, upon any outside industrial concerns attempting to start operations within the town. Job competition might result in a higher wage scale or better working conditions for workers, which would tend to undermine the almost absolute authority of the steel company owners.

The early employees of the steel industry were from mostly Irish, Scotch, Welsh and English backgrounds. With the growth of the industry and the vast influx of immigrants from Europe, the makeup of the workforce became predominantly Eastern, Middle and Southern European. The ethnic makeup of the workforce continued the same for some time as the second and third generations of these workers continued to seek employment within the industry. It is only since the mid-1930s that there has been a gradual change with Blacks,

Appalachian whites and Spanish-speaking people entering the industry until they now account for approximately 50 percent of the total work force.

There were many attempts to bring some sort of organization to the workers of the steel industry, some dating as far back as the Civil War. The Sons of Vulcan, the Knights of Labor, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers and others failed in their efforts to overcome the massive resistance of the owners of the industry. A major strike was conducted in 1919 with 350,000 workers on the streets, but the walkout was unsuccessful and the men were driven back to their jobs.

With the creation of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) in 1936, workers within the steel industry once again had an opportunity to attain their long-sought goal—an organization that would give them an opportunity to have a voice in the setting of their wage rates and the conditions under which they would work—in short, a measure of industrial democracy. To fulfill this goal, the CIO created the Steel Workers Organizing Committee under the leadership of Philip Murray. It announced that a nationwide drive would be made to enroll employees of the steel industry into the union. The union's goal was to be written contracts setting forth negotiated rates of pay, hours of work and other conditions of employment. The passage of the Wagner Labor Act by the Congress gave legitimacy for the first time to the workers' movement.

The industry leaders responded to the union move with a series of full-page advertisements in the nation's major daily newspapers stating their intent to protect their workers from the "outsiders."¹ The advertisements under the name of the American Iron and Steel Institute, the official organization of the industry, went on to describe in glowing terms the good conditions that existed within the mills and concluded by saying, "the Steel Industry will use its resources to the best of its ability to protect its employees and their families from intimidation, coercion and violence, and to aid them in maintaining collective bargaining free from interference from any source."²

Contrary to what the institute advertisements said, conditions were bad, pay averaged about \$0.42 per hour and the only collective bargaining that took place was by groups of workers organized into employee representation plans that later were ruled to be company-union dominated and financed by the employers. Thus the stage was set for what turned out to be a long and bloody period of industrial strife.

The generation gap is a topic often discussed today. There was a gap during those early days of the union but it was one of communication rather than generation. It was difficult for the workers to bridge this gap because the industry had the money and the access to the news media (which at that time was primarily newspaper, radio and

know-how in the propaganda field). On the other hand, the workers had the belief that their future could best be served by a union and they were determined to have that union.

The steelworkers underwent the terrible ordeal of bloodshed, firings, discrimination, deprivations and, in many instances, even death to establish their union, the United Steelworkers of America.

Steelworkers and their families in those days had as many problems, if not more, than they do today. But they had little time to devote to securing answers to other problems for they had to expend every effort in establishing a union. During those days there were few existing opportunities or agencies that they could turn to in times of need. Most charitable organizations within the community were dependent upon the generosity of the company for their operating funds. If they undertook to help a cause or person that might offend the company representative, they were without funds from then on. Unlike today, workers themselves could give little out of their meager paychecks. Under such conditions, one can well imagine what help a person would receive in such company-dominated towns as Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Gary, Indiana; or Weirton, West Virginia, all major steel-producing centers.

It was only with the outbreak of World War II that the open warfare between the union representing the workers and the steel industry came to a halt in the common effort to resist the European dictators. The union received a small measure of security and recognition with the establishment of the National War Labor Board which gave them the opportunity to resolve differences over the bargaining table without being forced to walk off their jobs.

It was during World War II that the CIO and the steelworkers developed the Community Services Program. The roots of the program are varied and there is little official documentation or formal records to trace its growth. There is, however, considerable knowledge of how community services developed in specific areas and local unions.

There were two basic reasons that motivated Murray to establish a CIO Community Services Program. The first involved a number of fund appeals from various organizations working with war refugees and victims of the Fascist and Nazi regimes who had to flee their countries. Of particular concern were the victims who were part of the European labor movement. The labor movement's primary concern was to see that the funds collected were channeled to where they would do the most good among these refugees.

A second reason why the Community Services Program developed was the need to bring some order to labor's contributions to local community chests and other voluntary social agency fund drives. It was during World War II that both CIO President Murray and AFL President William Green agreed to support and encourage payroll

deductions for local community chests. At the same time, it was agreed that in communities where labor had a substantial membership and where its contribution to these voluntary social agencies was sizable, the local community chest (later the United Fund) create a new position, that of community services representative. This person is nominated by the local central labor body, but he is paid by the United Fund. It is his function to implement a program developed by the central labor lobby and to abide by the policies determined by that same local labor movement. Certainly the steelworkers union can claim a major hand in establishing the United Community Services Program.

At this point, it might be well to describe the union concept of a Community Services Program. The program has evolved beyond its original concept. Today, the Community Services Program aims at several things: (1) to help build better community health, welfare and recreational services, (2) to tell union members about these help-giving social services and (3) to assist members in using them to meet personal and family health and welfare needs. AFL-CIO President George Meany said at the convention of that organization in 1963:

The well being of people is the prime objective of the AFL-CIO Community Services Program. Its setting is the American community. As the union member is first and foremost a citizen of his community, so the objective of the trade union movement is inseparably tied to the welfare of all people.

The purpose of the AFL-CIO Community Services Program is to encourage and train union members for active participation in the affairs of their communities. The Program's specific responsibility is to devise methods through which full use of community health and welfare agencies, services and facilities may be realized by all the people. Of particular and always urgent concern is the intelligent and full use of community social services by AFL-CIO families in meeting personal and family health and welfare problems.

The term "counselors" is mentioned many times in this discussion. It might be helpful to elaborate more on the term so that the reader will understand the counselor's function. It is the counselor who is the foundation of the system. "From here to there" is one local union officer's description of union counseling. In a way, he is right, for the union counselor is a link or bridge between a union member's personal problem here and the best sources of community help there. In other words, union counseling is a program to help union members use community social services in resolving personal, family and welfare problems.

Frequently members may have difficulty in getting from here to there—from problem to solution. For instance, some may not know

the location of or services offered by community health or welfare agencies. Or a union member may feel he does not qualify for community assistance. Sometimes he may be nervous, skeptical or reluctant about accepting outside help or advice. In such instances, the trained counselor provides a real service. He provides valuable information to the troubled person and by a sympathetic referral encourages him to take advantage of help-giving services and facilities provided by the community.

Men cannot live apart, strangers to the needs and problems of others. But to help others often requires special knowledge and information; it is through the special training that union counselors learn how to help their fellow citizens. It must be kept in mind that the counselor is not a social worker. He performs no miracles, even though some union members seem to think so after having received the benefits of his advice. He is the connecting link between here and there.

The operation of the South Chicago office is rather simple. An applicant for service simply fills out a short form stating his problem together with vital statistics regarding himself and his family. All of the information is strictly confidential, unless the member himself chooses to release it. Using this information, the counselor determines what kind of help is needed and where is the best place to seek the needed assistance. The community referral service of the Chicago Welfare Council, an agency of the United Fund, is his library of where and what services are available. The counselor maintains communication with the applicant until such time as the problem is resolved or it becomes apparent there is no solution available for the problem. This is one of the most important parts of the program, namely to follow up and see that the service requested is rendered in a satisfactory manner.

With this background, a description can be given of the growth of the Community Services Program in the Chicago area, and specifically in the South Chicago steelmaking community where union members comprise the largest single group. It is in the South Chicago area that the concept has been brought as near to complete fruition as possible.

In October of 1945, with the end of the war nearing, the steelworkers union and most other unions were gearing up for a series of contract negotiations with industry. Although some progress had been made in eliminating wage inequities during the war, there was still a lot of catching up to do. Working conditions were still bad and many improvements were needed.

The steelworkers' leadership, faced with the past history of open warfare on the part of management each time it sought improvements, began to prepare itself for the coming battles. The leadership realized that if the struggle was to be successful, it would have to

avail itself of all possible resources and use them fully. There was not enough money in either the union treasury or the pockets of the workers to finance the needs of the 600,000 steelworkers union members and their families in case of a prolonged walkout.

The union was well aware of the fact that there were many sources of help, both public and private, that could help sustain the workers if the need arose. The biggest problem was that not many knew where these services were, what they had to offer, or how to go about getting the help from them. When these questions were answered the union had to provide the personnel needed to counsel the members in their hour of need. This really was a communication gap of the greatest magnitude.

It was under these circumstances and with this historical background that the union launched a vast program of training its local union leaders to bridge this communication gap. The first class of some forty-eight local union leaders and active rank and file members met in the South Chicago branch of the Chicago Public Library to embark upon a course of instruction that would enable them to give counsel, advice and information to any member who had problems brought on by the strike.

The first full-time Community Services representatives of the Chicago United Fund, Myrna Bordelon and Ken Kramar, set up the course of study that was to be the pattern for hundreds of such courses in the years to follow. Representatives of all kinds of agencies, both public and private, were called in to instruct the budding information experts on what their particular agencies had to offer and how those services could be made available.

Naturally, the study program of that first class was directed to those subjects that would most help the striking members while out of work, primarily keeping food on the table. Representatives of the public agencies that deal with relief instructed the counselors-to-be in securing the services that could provide food and other benefits. Workers use installment buying to secure furniture, appliances, and most other necessities of life. Counselors had to be trained to forestall the repossession of these goods and be told how to get the information to accomplish this purpose.

Sickness and accidents are always present. Where does one go for help with these when there is no money to pay for a doctor or medication? Those agencies, both public and private, who are active in this field were called upon to instruct the workers' representatives in how to proceed in securing their services. The needs of the workers in caring for the elderly, the infirm, and the victims of chronic and deadly incurable diseases had to be examined and solved.

Unemployment insurance laws are tricky; therefore expert legal advice had to be made available if workers were to get the full benefits of the laws enacted for their protection. One whole class

session was devoted to the explanation of the relevant law. A good example of the kind of information made available was that workers on strike who are not called back to their jobs upon the immediate ending of the walkout are entitled to benefits under law. Many did not know that then, and many still do not know it today.

The result of this 1945 program in South Chicago is that forty-eight trained steelworker counselors in South Chicago were joined by hundreds of other similarly trained union workers from all sections of the city. These workers knew how to help their fellow workers secure services provided by the public and private agencies. Needless to say, the result of the work of this group of dedicated unionists was of tremendous help in winning the struggles with the steel and other industries following the end of World War II.

The success of the program during a crisis period did not generate enough momentum to continue it at the same level of activity during times of normalcy. However, the training process did continue on a smaller scale with more emphasis being attached to finding solutions for the worker who had "out-of-plant" problems.

The counselor training program was always intensified during periods of strikes, i.e., those times when collective bargaining contracts came open for renewals and there was the threat of massive numbers of unemployed workers with all sorts of problems. All during the 1950s, the program was continued, proving its worth when steelworkers were out of work, especially during the 116-day strike of 1959, the last major strike within the industry.

In 1964, Local 65, one of the larger local unions within the steelworkers which represents the employees of the South Works of the U. S. Steel Corporation, built a combination union meeting hall and office building. It was located not far from the mills in the very heart of the community. By this time, the growing number of problems confronting workers made it clear to the leadership that the program could no longer be continued on a hit-or-miss basis. There was an extreme need for a full-time information center.

Under the guidance and leadership of Joseph LaMorte, director of the Steelworkers Union in South Chicago, the counseling service was brought to a full-time basis. A permanent office was opened in the new building and manned on a voluntary basis by dedicated counselors of the union. Money was finally found to pay a modest salary and some expenses to those who had worked so long with their only reward being the satisfaction of knowing they were helping their fellow workers. It was this office that eventually became the operation that now exists.

The program became so successful that a new expanded office was opened on the main street of the community. Informed persons are there five days a week to keep the members advised. If additional time is needed, appointments can be made in the evenings or other hours to accomodate the member.

The program as originally conceived by Murray has grown far beyond anything he might have dreamed. Many of the problems handled are of the same type as in earlier days, but our modern complex society has caused many new kinds of problems for workers which require constant updating of the counselors' skills.

Hundreds of people are served at the center each month. A great many of these are not members of the union but simply live in the community, thus making the service, in fact, a community one. Many of the people who come simply need information on how or where they can get help. A surprising number of people come seeking information on the Social Security Act or where to go to learn what benefits they are entitled to under that law. People with mental health problems, either their own or those of members of their families, often seek help. In this particular category, the need was so great that the union played a major role in having a mental health clinic established in the area to serve the community, and is now one of the clinic's most ardent supporters.

Workers who have become alcoholics are always causing, at their places of employment, problems for the union. Not only do they pose a danger to themselves, but their actions while under the influence of alcohol can seriously injure their fellow workers. Both the company and the union realize, as do most enlightened persons, that alcoholism is a disease and must be treated as such. The union is well aware of the ravages of this disease to the member and indirectly to his family and was instrumental in forming a local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) to try to meet the needs of these workers. The U.S. Steel Corporation, before terminating a worker because of alcoholism, now refers him to a local chapter of AA for counseling and help. Because of this program, many workers have been returned to their jobs, been restored to health and found a useful place in the community.

Workers who have been injured during the course of their work come to the community services office to be informed of their rights under the State Workmen's Compensation Act. One night a week, a lawyer familiar with this act is there to guide the worker and, if the worker decides, the lawyer will act on his behalf before the State Industrial Commission. Millions of dollars in benefits have been recovered because workers were made aware of their rights under the act.

Some of the requests for assistance require little more than a short phone call while others are vastly complicated and require the work of highly trained persons in their respective fields. There are numerous other examples of the kinds of information made available at this office, but from the above-mentioned examples the reader should have a good idea of what is being done, so other parts of the program will now be discussed.

One might ask how the union maintains its staff of trained counselors. Each year, a recruitment program is launched to secure candidates to attend the eight-week basic training program that leads to a worker becoming a counselor. Once a group of twenty-five to thirty workers is assembled, they participate in once-a-week classes lasting from two to three hours. In communities where workers are on various shifts, afternoon or morning sessions are held. Generally, though, the classes meet in the evening. During the sessions, the students meet with representatives of the agencies to discuss specific health and welfare needs. As a rule, agency spokesmen make a short presentation outlining such details as agency services, locations, facilities and eligibility requirements. Class talks are followed by discussion.

In 1970 the Steelworkers trained more than 300 local union members in Chicago to be counselors. Many others attended advance classes dealing with safety and other related kinds of services. After the basic training program is over, there are a number of ways of making it known that the services of the new counselors are available. First of all, once the class is trained, the graduates receive their certificates at a graduation dinner which is attended by the union leadership, community leaders, speakers, and spouses of the graduates. The affair is given wide publicity through the union newspapers and otherwise. Secondly, each month the head counselor of the local makes a report to the local union meeting and later submits it in writing for publication in the local union paper.

The international union publication *Steel Labor* nearly always gives prominent space to the activities of the counseling service. But the most important and probably most effective method of letting people know of the service is by word of mouth. It is hard for a person not to tell of the success he had in processing an application for benefits following a work-related injury. When he receives a sizable award for his injury, it becomes well known. Or, when everyone knows that a person is losing work because of his drinking habits and then sees him restored to his former self, the news gets around. The sum total of these methods indicates that the service available is pretty well-known by the membership. The number of people who use it is a good indicator that they are aware of it.

The real worth of the service is in the day-to-day good that it does for those who use it. An indication of the need it can fulfill in times of emergency was dramatically demonstrated a short time ago. The history of bargaining in the steel industry is such that users of steel generally stock up with all the metal they can get prior to the expiration of the collective bargaining contract. The year 1971 was no different from others when the contracts are open. There was one major exception and that was the existence of an economic recession, or to those who might have lost their jobs, a depression.

Following the successful conclusion of the bargaining process in 1971, which incidentally did not include a strike, thousands of steelworkers were laid off their jobs. The problem was more acute because the industry virtually shut down due to the recession and lack of orders for steel. The welfare offices in South Chicago and other Calumet district steel communities were overwhelmed with workers filing claims for unemployment benefits, assistance, federal food stamps and for other kinds of help. The Steelworkers' Community Services Committee of South Chicago mobilized its trained counselors, converted the union hall to a massive relief office and speeded the processing of the claims and relief to the families. As many as 500 claims were handled in one day. In one fell swoop, taxpayers were saved thousands of dollars in wages and union members were given help in meeting their needs.

There is another aspect of this program that the reader should be aware of. There is a close tie between the results of this program and the election process. Steelworkers realize that they have a union today because of the legislative action of the U. S. Congress in enacting the Wagner Labor Act which made unions legal. In the same manner, an act of Congress can outlaw the union movement. An unfriendly chief executive can undo the work of generations or take away hard-won benefits by the same stroke of a pen; that is, the success of our South Chicago Community Services operation is directly related to our efforts in the field of political and legislative activity.

It is no secret that legislators on all levels cast their votes on every issue with one eye on the constituents back home. They also are well aware how those votes will affect their supporters. It is a simple axiom that if there is no response from the voters, there will be little affirmative action from the legislator.

Our union, like most others, maintains an active and hardworking political and legislative committee. It raises money to support candidates that are favorable to programs deemed to be in the best interests of the workers.

The constant struggle to get better legislation centers mainly on the so-called bread and butter issues. Equitable tax laws mean the difference in whether a wage increase or some other benefit won at the bargaining table or through a long hard struggle on the picket line will be a real benefit or be wiped out by legislation. Our counselors are continually advising the members they come in contact with of the impact that legislation can have and to contact their legislators to either vote for or against a proposed law. The recession or depression, whichever term one chooses to use, has made many wage earners realize that the benefits provided under the existing unemployment insurance act fall short of their needs in keeping their families fed and clothed.

No apologies are made for the fact that a prominent part of the training program for counselors concerns itself with the legislative and political process, and how it operates, either to secure benefits or deny workers their just share of the benefits of their taxes. Many of the questions posed to counselors stem from the worker's lack of knowledge concerning what his rights are and what benefits he is entitled to under a given piece of legislation. If there are no benefits, it is easy to say the worker has nothing coming. It is then that the worker realizes what his stake in political action can really be; good legislators mean good laws.

Another aspect of the South Chicago operation is the great amount of help received by unionists and people in the community from the various agencies affiliated with the United Fund and other charitable organizations. Because of this vast resource, the union movement is a strong United Fund supporter and urges its members to give each year to maintain those agencies affiliated with it. Without the service these agencies provide, there would often be no place to turn for help.

The counselors are also trained to become members of the boards of these various private agencies in order that the needs of the workers will be presented firsthand and that the agencies will have a means of keeping workers informed of their actions.

The last phase of this operation concerns financing. Most of our union counselors work without compensation and it is because of this that community information centers are able to continue. They could not continue if sufficient money had to be raised to finance the entire operation. Hall and office rents are very often donated, but in South Chicago, the rent is paid for out of a per capita tax paid into a central fund by the various locals in the vicinity. The chief counselor is allowed a small salary for lost time and a modest amount of expense money.

I have tried to picture this community information center as a part of the overall union program. Without a doubt, other groups could probably do as well in maintaining this most vital and necessary service. It is hoped that the information provided might be of help to others attempting to determine their course of action in the information field.

REFERENCES

1. Sweeney, Vincent D. *The United Steelworkers of America, Twenty Years Later, 1936-1956*. (n.p.).
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.